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Strengthening Your Community by Tackling Challenges Together: Lessons from the High Desert Partnership

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Strengthening Your Community by Tackling Challenges Together:

Lessons Learned from the High Desert Partnership

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***Strengthening Your Community by Tackling
Challenges Together:
Lessons from the High Desert Partnership***

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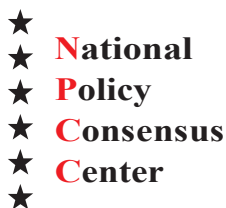
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“I think the HDP is a resounding success. If there’s any takeaway for me, it’s that it has to come from the community. Most rural communities don’t want to be told what to do. You need to have a core group from the community to move the process ahead day after day.”

— Steve Grasty

The High Desert Partnership as a Force for Community Progress

The people of Harney County, Oregon, have a story to tell about healing decades of conflict and coming together to ensure their community survives and thrives. Harney County, located in the southeast corner of the state, is the largest and one of the least populated of Oregon’s counties. It is a place of wide open spaces, with sagebrush deserts, rich wetlands, expansive alkali flats, stark mountains, and stately ponderosa pine forests. The economy relies heavily on the land for farming, ranching, and forestry. Yet the majority of Harney’s land is publicly owned. Historically, that was a recipe for heated disagreements around public land management, private land use, and environmental preservation.

A few visionary thinkers in Harney County saw a way around the conflict by bringing community members, government, and environmental groups together to help them discover they had more in common than they had that divided them. What developed was a community-wide commitment to working together to make Harney County better.

The High Desert Partnership (HDP) formed to support a wide range of local collaborative projects from managing wetlands to improving opportunities for youth. This guide shares the HDP’s formula for getting things done. Their hope is that other communities that are ready to create a lasting approach to tackling tough issues will benefit from what Harney County has learned.

An Unlikely Partnership Breaks the Log Jam

The seed for the HDP sprouted in 1999 when unlikely partners, a local rancher and a wildlife refuge manager in Harney County, met and explored possibilities for bringing people from inside and outside the county together to work together on local disagreements about land. They had many meetings with others about the idea and brought them together to officially form the HDP in 2005.



(Left to right) HDP board members Jay Kirby, Gary Marshall, Chad Karges, and Dan Nichols

“The right people sat down and said no one is winning here—is there a better way to do this? With the collaborative, people were willing to get beyond partisanship and talk to each other.” — Pam Hardy

The HDP advocated for a collaborative approach when in 2008 a new comprehensive conservation plan was needed for the Malheur Wildlife Refuge. The people responsible for and relying on the land had some conflicting ideas about how to approach the refuge. But, instead of continuing to get nowhere by fighting in court, the group was willing to try a collaborative approach to resolving conflicts between ranching and wildlife conservation.

The HDP provided support for the work on the refuge plan. They brought in funding and a professional facilitator who helped the group over the next three years to work through their differences and develop a plan for the refuge. The plan balanced environmental protection with the community’s economic well-being. It improved relationships between federal agencies and community members. After the success on the refuge plan, HDP’s founding group recognized that there was an opportunity to work on other kinds of land management issues, such as fire and wetlands management.

The HDP has continued to grow into a successful nonprofit with a board, executive director, and staff. It is a platform or backbone organization that provides support and finds funding for its many HDP collaboratives in the region. The HDP board determines what issues in the community might benefit from a collaborative approach. Once HDP has helped establish a collaborative to work on an issue, that group will use consensus—a process by which all or nearly all of the parties agree to support a decision even if they don’t get everything they want—to identify solutions and specific projects to address the issue.



“HDP put a tremendous amount of investment and time in building relationships early on. They reached within and outside the community, and that was mutually beneficial. Having the right people in the right roles and knowing the right way to interact with the community is critical.”

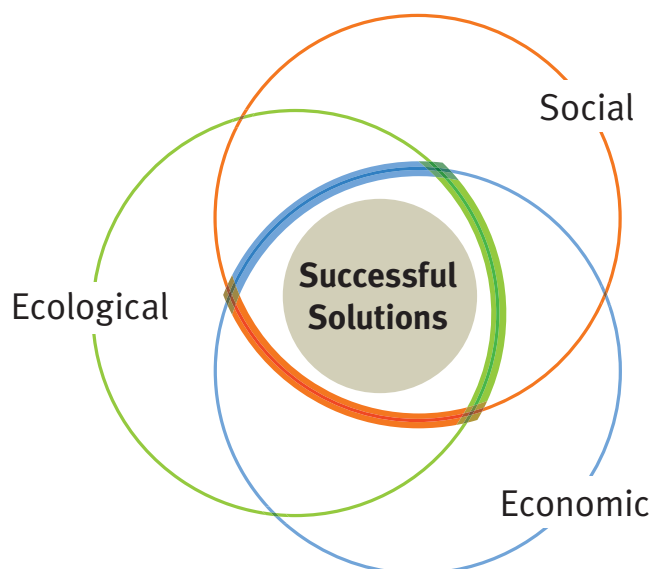
— Dustin Johnson

The High Desert Partnership is a Local Platform for Collaboratives

A collaborative is a group of people representing public, private, and non-government entities. They work together to accomplish an agreed-upon goal relating to a public issue. A community-based collaborative tackles issues that impact a local community or region by involving local people in solving the problems.

The High Desert Partnership (HDP) serves as a **local platform** or backbone to support many collaboratives working on a range of issues in the community or region. The HDP forms the collaboratives and establishes guiding principles for them. It also handles meeting logistics, brings in funding, and provides other support.

HDP's Collaborative Lens



Benefits of Collaboration

The people in the Harney County area benefit from the HDP's work in many ways. They get to know each other better and understand each other's needs and views. Through working together, they are better able to come up with solutions to long-standing public problems. Their community is also more prepared to address new challenges when they arise. The HDP helps them to identify and respond to concerns before they become a crisis. The HDP also brings in funding to the community as the result of consensus around issues that need to be addressed.

Recent High Desert Partnership Collaboratives

The Harney County Restoration Collaborative is increasing the pace and scale of restoration for the Southern Malheur National Forest. The focus is finding solutions to improve the health and resilience of the forest, while improving the economic and social conditions of Harney County.

The Harney County Wildfire Collaborative works together to reach consensus on landscape-scale practices and projects related to wildfire prevention, suppression, and restoration. The collaborative explores how land management strategies from suppression to controlled burns help reduce risks to life, property, and wildlife.

“I was new to the community when I joined the collaboratives and was pleasantly surprised on so many levels. People were inspiring on a personal level, and on a professional level I got to meet people working in different spheres. Harney County was open and welcoming.

— Calla Hagle



High school and college students getting real-world experience in natural resource jobs and furthering the goals of the HDP's Harney Basin Wetlands Initiative through summer tech positions

Members of HDP collaboratives include field trips in their work to further understand the complex issues they are tackling

The Harney Basin Wetlands Initiative focuses on watershed health for Harney Lake and Malheur Lake, area rivers, and wet meadows. Through scientific research and strategic planning, the collaborative tackles issues from removal of invasive fish to enhancing habitats for agriculture, plants, and animals.

Youth Changing the Community Collaborative puts youth in the driver seat to inform how community resources serve their needs. Youth also create hands-on learning experiences that benefit their growing minds and bodies. Those experiences include community service projects, job training, and a youth entrepreneur program.



Lessons from the High Desert Partnership

The following tips are based on lessons learned from the work of the HDP and its collaboratives:

1

Build a committed core team.

Attract and engage respected leaders. Leaders with different perspectives and interests build credibility and open the door to participants with a wide range of viewpoints. Ranchers and federal agency staff, an unlikely combination, started the HDP. They didn't have a solution already in mind, but they recognized the status quo wasn't working. They shared a strong commitment to working together and were willing to risk doing something different, even if they didn't know how it would turn out. The community saw them as strategic thinkers who had useful connections. They created a table where a variety of interest groups and individuals could feel they belonged.

Include people who can build bridges with people outside the collaborative. The HDP finds it useful to include people with broad networks. Those people are a bridge to interested people outside the collaborative. For example, the HDP seeks to include people who can help elected officials see how the HDP's work can help constituents.

Tips for Successful Community Collaboratives

1. Build a committed core team.
2. Invest a lot of time in building relationships and trust.
3. Be inclusive.
4. Choose issues carefully.
5. Follow guiding principles for collaboration.
6. Use a skilled facilitator.
7. Provide collaboration support through the local platform.
8. Keep people engaged over the long term.

Participants in a Harney County Restoration Collaborative meeting



“The process takes time. It pays dividends many times over when you invest a lot in relationships. Problems come and go and relationships carry on.” — Jay Kerby

Gary Marshall, cofounder of HDP, and other Harney County residents at one of the coffee events, which provide an opportunity for informal community conversation



2 Invest a lot of time in building relationships and trust.

Include the right people at the right time. The HDP initially emerged from a small network of people who knew that they all cared deeply about the community. Then it brought in more participants. This approach created a backbone of trust. It made the larger effort possible. They chose participants thoughtfully. They first met informally with people to judge their readiness to collaborate. These early opportunities to hear other’s views showed respect for diverse views and built support for collaboration.

Provide informal time together. It is important to the HDP to provide informal time when members of a collaborative can get to know each other better. Someone has said “it takes a hundred cups of coffee to build trust in a collaborative process.” One strategy that works well for the HDP is to hold meetings that start in the afternoon and resume the following morning. That schedule allows people to share a meal and conversation. Creative ideas and solutions often come up during field trips and informal meal times when people are more relaxed.

Draw from the community. The HDP emerged from the community in response to a locally-felt need. It has long-term commitments from local board members and other neighbors. Those community roots attract people to HDP collaboratives and keep them involved.

Be sure that participants can represent their organization. The HDP’s collaboratives include participants who can speak for their organizations. However, participants need to be careful not to harm group trust by promising to do more than they are authorized to do. The HDP’s collaborative approach initially met with agency resistance. Agency staff who helped start the HDP urged their agencies to support collaboration. Eventually, high-level employees at the agencies saw collaboration as a way to solve tough problems.

Be clear about limitations. The collaboratives work to clarify how much they can affect existing public policy. Doing so reduces frustration that can fracture trust when results are not ideal or policies are out of local control.

Make room for respectful arguments. The HDP understands that sometimes people will argue about things they disagree about. HDP collaboratives allow people to share their views even when people hold different opinions. Good collaboration requires respect.

“To me, equity means open participation by anyone who wants to be included. We know we have diverse interests who have a stake and want to have input so we work to maintain an open process.”

— Brenda Smith



Brenda Smith, HDP Executive Director, Teresa Wicks of Portland Audubon, and Janelle Wicks of Friends of the Malheur Refuge at a community coffee event

Make room for skepticism. The collaboratives give people who have doubts about collaboration time to talk about their doubts. Views are treated with respect. People learn to trust that they can bring up issues that matter to them.

Dive deep even when things are going well. Even when collaboration seems to be moving forward, below the surface deep conflicts may still exist. It is important to help people talk about hard issues as relationships deepen. This way, conflicts can be surfaced and addressed, and the group can keep working together smoothly.

3 Be inclusive.

Allow open participation. The HDP allows anyone, including naysayers, to join a collaborative as long as the person is constructive and not disruptive. People do need to agree to the HDP’s code of conduct for consensus decision making. Meetings of the collaboratives are also open to the public.

Include people with experience collaborating. The HDP collaboratives include members who have worked on other collaborative processes. Experience with these earlier efforts built confidence that collaboration would work for new issues. Confidence spreads to other participants who hear about previous success.

Include people who can talk about government rules and regulations. In its collaboratives, the HDP includes people who know about relevant laws. These people help balance the discussion by bringing information that not everyone in the room has. They also help people understand legal constraints on some solutions.

Be somewhat flexible about participation. Some people in the collaboratives have important contributions to make even though they participate less often in meetings and field trips. They contribute when an issue falls within their area of expertise or affects places that they care deeply about. Making room for people who can make only a limited commitment brings valuable viewpoints into the discussion.

Help new people transition into the group. The collaboratives educate new participants about what the group has worked on. A facilitator, group members, or a board member can meet with the new person to share background and explain decisions. New people are then able to contribute fully.

4

Choose issues carefully.

Start with a situation that is both challenging enough and local enough for people to care. Conflict and frustration can be a catalyst for collaboration. Conflict was the reason the HDP participants first got together. There were widespread concerns about the impact of environmental protection on the local economy. Relationships were tense. Other approaches (like lawsuits) for solving the problems were not working and were costing a lot of money. People did not want to see more conflict in the community. They were willing to try collaboration.

Pick issues that are ready for collaboration. Members of the HDP board talk to others in the community before deciding which issues to work on. They explore the range of viewpoints. Doing so tells the board whether people are willing to work with others. Taking on an issue before the work has sufficient local and political support could lead to failure.

Ensure the time is right. The HDP knows that not all issues can be solved at any given time. Lack of data or the challenge of guessing the future sometimes delays a decision. The HDP helps people understand that some issues may not be ripe for a solution.

“People need to see there is a real problem and want to solve the problem. It takes time to listen to everyone, but everyone’s opinion counts. It can be a long process, but it’s valuable because everyone has buy-in and comes out with a shared plan.”

— Donna Schnitker

Cattle and migrating birds sharing a flood-irrigated wet meadow



“You need to assess leadership capacity. Leaders fundamentally need to create a safe, neutral space for diverse interests to interact. Generally speaking, you need a backbone organization—the role an organization like HDP plays needs to be there. High quality facilitation support is also essential.” — Chad Karges



Collaborative group members respectfully listen to other viewpoints

5 Follow guiding principles for collaboration.

Address behavior, not just issues. The HDP collaboratives take time to focus on effective group behaviors. Those behaviors include giving everyone an opportunity to talk and encouraging people to listen carefully to each other.

Work for civility and patience. Facilitators of HDP collaboratives help keep things civil. They remind the groups that it takes time to solve difficult issues.

Handle issues holistically. The HDP recognizes that economic, social, and resource issues are connected. They know the collaboratives can't resolve these problems in isolation. The principle of taking a holistic view helps prevent the HDP from appearing to favor one interest group or person.

Balance power. The HDP assumes that nobody has more of a right to be at the table than anyone else. This principle ensures that everyone's views are given thorough consideration.

Make the most of positive community attitudes. The HDP and its collaboratives model courtesy and neighborliness that are already present in the community. Doing so reinforces the community's own tendencies. It fosters courteous discussion and helps people act in good faith.

Let the collaboratives solve the problems. The HDP talks to the community and decides what issues or broad topic areas the collaboratives will work on. The collaboratives find the solutions. This principle empowers the collaboratives and makes the most of each collaborative's knowledge and creativity.





Meeting of the Harney County Restoration Collaborative

“Having professional facilitation was critical to the collaborative process. Facilitators made sure everyone got their say and had a platform to stand on.”

— Bruce Taylor

Value shared learning. Collaborators learn from each other. They take that knowledge back to their jobs and the community. The HDP knows that relationships can’t improve if solving issues is the only measure of success. Learning counts as success, too.

Seek consensus but accept partial success. The HDP is committed to consensus decision making. However, if good faith efforts to be inclusive fail, the collaboratives are willing to move on with partial support. Even without full consensus, they are able to address some of the issues or parts of the problem.

Don’t allow funders to prescribe outcomes. The HDP does not accept funds from people who want to direct the collaboratives’ activities. This precaution lets the HDP control its work and remain impartial.

Strive for equitable outcomes for all. The HDP allows anyone to participate in collaboratives and makes sure all decisions are made in meetings, not outside the room. Some group members find that having an equal opportunity to be heard creates a fair process and equitable outcomes.

Use science early and often to test solutions. Science is a tool for building shared learning across a broad range of people who understand how research applies to local issues. Discussing science as a basis for solutions helps build trust. It creates a sense of shared ownership of data and ways to collect information.

6 Use a skilled facilitator.

Bring in a facilitator with expertise in collaborative process.

Professional facilitators do the following:

- Lead by example
- Set the tone for healthy engagement
- Hold a group accountable to each other
- Introduce strategies to work through challenges
- Create a safe place for conversations
- Watch for things that could derail the process, such as gaps in knowledge
- Make sure that everyone is heard
- Create trust in the process even when participants are still developing trust in each other

“It’s important to document agreements made in the group. Documentation is key to catching people up to speed, recording history of what’s happened, and making clear that there are group ground rules and principles about how you treat each other and interact.”

— Benjamin Cate

A Healthy Kids Healthy Forest event at Idlewild Campground is a partnership of HDP’s Harney County Restoration Collaborative and Harney District Hospital



Use a facilitator who will be seen as impartial. Facilitators from outside the community helped the HDP get a good start. A facilitator from outside the community was less likely to be seen as aligned with any position in the community.

7 Provide collaboration support through the local platform.

Be an administrative backbone for the collaboratives. The HDP stewards the collaboratives’ work. The HDP handles meeting logistics. It also aids ongoing communication within and among the collaboratives. The HDP keeps the community informed about the work of the collaboratives.

Seek funding, including in-kind support. The HDP finds funding for its collaboratives. Funds from a range of private and public donors provide essential resources for the groups. Federal agencies’ and other participants’ investment of in-kind support is also key. The personal networks of HDP board members are valuable for making connections with funding sources.

Consider formalizing the local platform’s structure. The HDP became a 501c3 nonprofit organization and created a board. Doing so allowed the HDP to accept outside funding. The HDP also hired an executive director. Having a formal structure creates accountability that can help bring in funding and contributions of time.



“Be prepared to stay the course, prepared for things to take time. Look for what might be considered a small win on the way to the big win you’re aiming for. Even when you take a step back, something is being learned that undoubtedly will help move things forward.”

— Marla Polenz



An annual invasive carp round-up at Malheur Lake is part of the solution to improve the ecological health of the lake

Summer techs visit a pond to check out the latest carp study—reducing invasive carp is an HDP collaborative initiative

8 Keep people engaged over the long term.

To keep people engaged over the past decade, the HDP did the following:

- Established a board that could represent a broad range of community interests
- Held regular board meetings
- Constantly worked on relationships
- Maintained open participation
- Maintained a stable local platform for work
- Sought concrete outcomes
- Built community reputation and support
- Celebrated successes and used them to expand collaborative conversations

Conclusion

The HDP’s work shows that building a local platform to support community-based collaboratives can bring diverse people together to solve tough local problems. That platform lets community members be heard. It allows them to work through issues to find solutions they can all agree on. Such local platforms also improve follow-through and implementation of solutions. At the core of it all are community members who care about understanding others and working together on solutions that last. Other communities may want to explore how to develop a local platform like the HDP to support collaboratives of their own.



“Seek solutions that are economically, ecologically, and socially acceptable. HDP does not come with the solution or a point of view; they’re there to support the process. HDP brings people together; the people in the room come up with the solutions.”

— Jack Southworth

About the Study

During 2018–2019, the National Policy Consensus Center (NPCC) in the Hatfield School of Government at Portland State University did a study of the High Desert Partnership (HDP). It explored how and why this platform for community-based collaboratives emerged and what sustains it.

Researchers interviewed twenty-one people, including:

- HDP board members
- People involved in the HDP collaboratives
- Facilitators
- Other community members

Responses were grouped by themes. Those themes showed factors that helped make the HDP successful. The tips in this guide are based on those success factors.

Learn more about the High Desert Partnership at
www.highdesertpartnership.org



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